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ABSTRACT

In response to legislative mandate and pressure from its accrediting agency, Blue Ridge Community College (BRCC) began to develop a system to measure the effectiveness of its instructional programs. The system was designed to improve curricula, be managed by faculty, be inexpensive and uncomplicated, and focus on qualitative rather than quantitative measures. The first steps in the generation of the assessment plan were the appointment of an Assessment Committee, composed of five faculty members, two division chairs, and the registrar; the preparation and state approval of the assessment plan; the provision of release time for faculty to teach other faculty about new assessment requirements; and full meetings of the faculty to garner support. The assessment plan requires that faculty members: (1) design a system for evaluating their own programs that provides for the measurement of student outcomes at matriculation, during enrollment, at graduation, and at some point during the subsequent five-year period; (2) submit the program evaluation plan to the Assessment Committee for approval; (3) implement the plan on a four-year cycle and provide data and a written report on outcomes to the Faculty Curriculum Committee; (4) alter program content according to evaluation results or explain to their peers why changes should not be made. Currently, all of BRCC's occupational programs have developed assessment plans that have been documented and approved, though most were rejected upon their first submission to the Assessment Committee. A wide variety of variables, measures, and data sources have been chosen, though most departments have elected to use ad hoc surveys, standardized placement tests, and other straightforward methods to gather data. The advent of assessment has led the faculty at BRCC to reconsider and expand its role in governance, college planning, personnel changes, and decision making. (JMC)

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Student Educational Outcomes Assessment: Implications for Institutional Governance

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The implementation of student educational outcomes assessment should generate a system in which curricular goals are stated, outcomes are measured and evaluated, and then the curriculum is adjusted as indicated by the evaluation. Within postsecondary institutions, faculty are the curricular experts. It is the faculty role to set curricular goals, to develop mensuration schemes, to evaluate the curriculum, and to select and implement curricular change. The student educational outcomes assessment process can be used to provide a space for the empowerment of faculty in spheres such as budget and personnel which are typically controlled by administration. This paper presents a case study.

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I will be talking about a process which led faculty to dramatically increase its power and influence, and also its professionalism. This paper describes a viable process for the creation of additive power in academe, and describes how it worked at one college.

During the first few months of 1987, the Blue Ridge Community College faculty and administration were faced with the most formidable challenge in recent memory. We learned that, as a result of legislative mandate and pressure from our accrediting agency -- the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools -- we would be required to show that our instructional programs were effective. But we had little idea of what that meant.

Our discussions with colleagues at nearby schools opened to us a growing network of people whose ideas we could apply freely, and whose patience has appeared boundless. In retrospect, we could not have developed a workable system without them. Unfortunately, they could provide only information. The nature of the task is such that each college must make its own decisions, and then live with them. The remainder of this paper describes the nature of Blue Ridge, the decisions we've made, where we are in terms of living with those decisions, and how this has affected college governance.

Blue Ridge is a small, rural, community college in the central Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Our mission is to provide education, training, and community service. We employ 38 full time faculty, as well as about 100 adjuncts, and have an annualized FTES of about 1200.

For many years, Blue Ridge has had components of outcomes assessment in place. Each occupational curriculum had a lay curriculum advisory committee of employers and former students. Students evaluated faculty and courses. We surveyed graduates on an annual basis and we had a variety of outside organizations review our programs. But these pieces do not a system make. Most of these components were imposed on faculty by administrators, none was integrated with the others, and curricular adaptation was oriented toward either internal crises or external funding.

That has all changed. We have always assumed that we were doing a good job. Now we have in place a system which is endorsed by the administration and the faculty. It allows us to measure curricular effectiveness and to improve curricula in an orderly and productive manner.

In the beginning...

The evolution of the system has been influenced by Blue Ridge's culture. The average faculty member has been at BRCC for 12 years, and takes more than a modicum of pride in the College.

"Entrenched" may be pejorative, but it is certainly descriptive of our faculty. Both administrators and faculty agree that faculty should be responsible for curriculum, and should have an influential role in college governance. Both administrators and faculty agree that faculty should show initiative, taking a grip on problems and solving them, rather than relying on an understaffed bureaucracy to answer difficult questions.

Neither the faculty nor the administration was comfortable with having an assessment model imposed on the faculty by the administration. Neither the faculty nor the administration wanted to place at unnecessary risk the comfortable working relationship between the two groups. And neither the faculty nor the administration wanted to be associated with something that was ineffective, disreputable, or a locus of daily drama.

We all wanted something that would help the College do an even better job for its service area. These agreements on faculty role set the stage for the College's response to the challenge of assessment.

We created a set of policies from which the remainder of the system could be generated. Some of those policies are:

1. The purpose of the outcomes assessment system is to improve our curricula, rather than to certify students, evaluate faculty, compare curricula, or compare our performance to that of other schools.

2. Since the purpose of the system is curricular, and since in a college the curricular experts are faculty, the system is designed, implemented, and managed by faculty, both at the program and at the College level.

3. Because the assessment system does not bring with it new fiscal or human resources, it must compete for resources in what sometimes seems a zero sum game. In order to reduce conflicts with present operations, the assessment system is inexpensive to operate and to update, and requires as little effort as possible.

4. The more complicated and technically sophisticated the methodology, the less likely that it will be understood, be applied, and prove useful. Therefore, the system is both low-tech and straight-forward. At times this seems to give research types an ulcer or two, but a little worrying is probably therapeutic for them.

5. A useful assessment system is unlikely to be a useful tool for basic research. Assessment is inherently applied, and does not require either high levels of precision or the services of "Tom Swift and his electric factor analysis machine." From the perspectives of the faculty and the administration, qualitative

information is more valuable than quantitative information, given that the primary focus is on curricular improvement. For our purpose, assessment is and should be more art than science.

Upon receipt of a set of state mandates requiring that we generate an assessment plan, the Dean of Instruction and Student Services appointed an Assessment Committee. The selection of the Committee members proved crucial. Of eight members, two were the College's division chairmen, a third was the Registrar (who doubled as the institutional researcher), and the remaining five were teaching faculty members whose mean tenure at BRCC was 17 years. Of the five faculty members appointed to the Assessment Committee, one was the Chairman of the Faculty Senate, one was a former Chairman of the Faculty Senate, and all five were the senior faculty in their respective disciplines. As at most other colleges, primus inter pares is the key to curricular change.

The five faculty members were all sufficiently experienced that none felt inhibited by the presence of the three administrators. That the faculty members formed a majority of the Committee was important for form, not substance. At no point in the operation of the Committee has there been a faculty-administrator split in voting -- in fact very few formal votes have been cast. The Committee views itself as analogous to a council of elders providing guidance based on experience and scholarship. Others outside the Committee perceive it as a group wrestling with an arcane challenge, one that we'd all rather forget, but which will not go away. The Committee has made decisions and recommendations, and then marketed them to both faculty and administrators. Never during the course of the Committee's operation has any of its recommendations or decisions been rejected by either the faculty or the administration.

The Assessment Committee charge was to do what seemed necessary and desirable in the way of outcomes assessment, both in planning and in implementation. The Committee wrote the College Assessment Plan, presented it for review and comment, got little of either, and gained approval for the Plan from the Virginia Community College System. That was the easy part.

Selling the assessment concept and the Plan to the faculty at large was a challenge. Outcomes assessment sharply contrasted with Blue Ridge's tradition of live and let live. It meant that accountability was on the horizon, and that, in turn, created considerable anxiety.

The workload of the typical faculty member had already increased substantially during the preceding eighteen months. We had acquired a new President, a clear mandate for increased productivity, and a perception that financial stability [and positions] depended on increased productivity. Faculty were feeling threatened, overloaded, put upon, and generally

down-trodden. Some of our faculty had never been expected to lead or change anything, and now it seemed that everybody was being expected to lead and to change everything at once.

It was into this less than ideal matrix that student educational outcomes assessment was cast. The Committee's first attempt at involving the general faculty was a failure -- as previously mentioned, the review and comment effort was nearly fruitless. The Committee decided that a different strategy was called for. One [and later two] of its faculty members was granted released time to work with other faculty on a one-to-one basis. The idea of a faculty member being paid by a college to teach other faculty has its interesting points, but it communicated far more effectively than did the posting of notices, the distribution of copies, and the making of announcements.

Since the Assessment Plan required additional work of each faculty member, it became the task of the released-time faculty members to clarify what was required and to provide encouragement. More importantly, there was a need to overcome worries about the use of outcomes data to evaluate faculty, about the perceived possibility of a vendetta against faculty by administrators, and about the need for evaluation skills not possessed by individual faculty members. BRCC's strategy made it relatively easy for most faculty members to perceive both the inevitability and the desirability of assessment, but there still remain a few faculty with concerns about workload excesses and skills deficits, as well as some residual institutional paranoia.

The released-time faculty members' efforts were facilitated by presentations at two consecutive faculty meetings. At one, the members of the Committee presented the Plan, described its virtues, and endured the slings and arrows of outraged faculty. At a second meeting, the faculty members of the Committee provided more information and faced somewhat less opposition. It seemed a case of gradually wearing down the opposition, while lobbying in smoke-filled rooms for support. But it worked.

How it works

Although Blue Ridge's assessment system includes evaluations of placement activities, general education [both in transfer and in vocational curricula], and other components, we decided to focus most of our early efforts on assessment in the occupational majors, because it was in the majors that we saw the most obvious need and the greatest potential for a quick payoff for faculty who had reservations about the utility of assessment. Here was our opportunity to make a difference.

We designed a system for assessment in the majors which is an unusual merging of administrative and instructional roles, but seems to be working. Let's consider the system at the level of the

individual faculty member.

The faculty member is assigned responsibility by his division chairman for an instructional program, for example, business management. The faculty member is told that the Committee has written the BRCC Assessment Plan, that the Plan has been approved by the Virginia Community College System, and that certain requirements must be met. Those requirements are:

1. The faculty members within each program must design a system for evaluating their own programs, with the following constraints:

a. the faculty members must state clearly what the goals of each program are.

b. there must be at least one measure upon matriculation, one during the student's tenure at Blue Ridge, one at the point of graduation, and one at some point during the subsequent five year period. There is no requirement that any particular mensuration device be used. However, each program goal must be measured at least once during the program review cycle.

c. No measure used for assessment purposes may be used for grading purposes, and vice versa. Grades are of little use in improving curricula, and allowing use of grades in our assessment system would create the potential for degrading the otherwise independent assessment system. If grades were admitted as measures, inevitably there would be rumors of self-serving grading practices. Faculty and administrators also might be tempted by the law of least effort and thus use grades more and more as a focal measure, creating in student assessment a new application of Gresham's Law.

d. Every measure must be documented. Existing data bases should be used if they meet the need. The low-tech, concrete, qualitative, inexpensive, and simple are preferred.

2. The faculty members associated with each program were required to submit their plan, with supporting documents [e.g., survey forms, essay questions] to the Assessment Committee according to a set calendar, and gain approval of their plan.

3. Those faculty members must then [on a 4 year cycle] implement the plan and provide both their data and a written report to the Faculty Curriculum Committee at the end of the following academic year. The report must evaluate the data, describe what changes are indicated, what changes the faculty members will make, and what changes the faculty members are requesting that the Curriculum Committee make.

4. The same program faculty members must gain approval from

the Curriculum Committee for their end of year report.

The only point at which the administration enters into the assessment process is through enforcement by the division chairmen of a requirement that program faculty gain timely approval of their plan from the Assessment Committee, and of their end of year report from the Curriculum Committee. Faculty are responsible for evaluating the reports written by their peers. The role of administrators is restricted to timeliness, not substance.

In fact, the system as a whole provides only a little form, and allows nearly untrammeled diversity. The faculty members associated with each program must name their own poison. And that's not easy for some to do. They must select their own measures, and report on what they mean. And gain peer approval.

But the key feature is that faculty must either adapt program content according to what they find out or explain to their peers why changes should not be made.

Three rationales were used to communicate to faculty and to administrators why we were bothering with assessment. First, the process would lead us to improve the quality of the education we provide. Second, it would allow faculty members to seize control of their own fate. And third, it could be a useful student recruiting device. The Assessment Committee made quite clear that while some assessment effort was required by outside agencies, we were taking it seriously because of its utility at Blue Ridge.

After a few weeks of broad-based discussions, the Assessment Committee assigned each of its members to serve as liaison with several programs. They visited faculty from each of the programs, offering advice and support, and also offering to help shepherd the draft program plan through the Assessment Committee. They provided concrete examples of how various problems could be solved with a minimum of work. Offers of assistance, predictably, were seldom refused.

Current Status

All of Blue Ridge's occupational programs now have documented assessment plans approved by the Assessment Committee. Most have developed their survey materials. Resistance to the concept of assessment has faded.

Most program assessment plans were rejected upon their first submission to the Assessment Committee. Almost all of the rejections were due to communication failures secondary to an evolving system, rather than because of faculty foot-dragging. The Assessment Committee required that some plans be revised as many as three times prior to approving them. There is now no question that faculty are holding faculty accountable, while providing them

with the support they need to attack a formidable task.

Faculty members have chosen a wide variety of variables to measure, and a wide variety of data sources. Most have elected to use ad hoc surveys of some or all of the following: students, graduates, local advisory committees, employers, and field internship supervisors. The most commonly selected standardized test is the "Assessment and Placement Test for Community College Students" [College Board] in reading, writing and mathematics, which is required of all matriculating students. Several program faculty, e.g., veterinary technology, nursing, automotive, and secretarial science, have elected to use certification or licensing examinations administered by external agencies as circum-graduation measures. No program faculty have decided to use any standardized test other than those used for educational placement or for certification or licensing. And we are reviewing the utility of the placement tests.

Except for the few standardized tests and the certification and licensing examinations, the data collection devices are generally straight-forward. Most faculty have decided to abandon subtlety and simply ask people the questions that need to be answered. The modal questions are on the order of "What are the strong [or weak] points of the BRCC graduates you've hired?" and "How should the College improve this program?"

There is no shortage of mensuration choices. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [SACS], our regional accrediting agency, has been quite obliging in listing a multitude of data sources. Our faculty members have chosen to use some on the SACS list [and some not on the list], but have rejected some options entirely. For example, no faculty members have elected to use a rating scale. From their perspective [and ours] rating scales, like grades, are difficult to translate into curricular change. No program faculty have restricted their assessment plans to the minimum required of them. Some program plans go far beyond what the Assessment Committee requires. In each program, the assessment plan reflects the unique attributes and resources of the program; while there is some overlap in methodology, no two program assessment plans are alike.

Getting faculty to commit to the assessment process has been a fascinating experience. As previously indicated, we used both traditional formal and peer methods. The peer methods were fundamentally a combination of teaching and reassurance with some guidance.

The mere advent of the assessment process has caused most faculty to rethink their programs, and to take a serious look at what their program goals should really be. For the first time in a long while, many are examining the population they are trying to serve, and reconsidering how they can best do so. Two recent

grant-funded activities have proven useful adjuncts for faculty who are taking a serious look at their courses and curricula.

The first of these activities was "Reading and Writing across Curricula," in which during a two year period two-thirds of our faculty integrated reading and writing requirements into their courses. The second activity, now in its second year, is more ambitious. We are working with faculty at two other community colleges [Germanna and Northern Virginia] to define [conceptually and operationally] what critical thinking means within the curricula at each institution. If expectations become reality, each institution will integrate the assessment of critical thinking into its assessment of general education.

Implications for Governance

The advent of assessment has led the faculty to reconsider its role in governance. Until assessment became a part of our culture, the faculty role in governance was mostly passive unless some administrative activity rankled; then the faculty role became adversarial. But faculty did not have a continuing role in the management of the college. We decided to use assessment as a lever to change that.

The Assessment Committee has dropped its function of reviewing occupational/technical program assessment plans, and has passed that function to the Curriculum Committee. The Assessment Committee is restricting its role to development of new functions, both within assessment and otherwise. For example, the Assessment Committee is now reviewing our student tracking in developmental studies, and implementing assessment procedures in general education both in occupational/technical and in transfer programs. When these functions become completely operational, they, too will be passed to other committees.

Within the next year or so the Assessment Committee will be reconstituted as the steering committee for the SACS process. The faculty has written and approved the strategic planning process for the College. Faculty are working with the administration to shape the College's master plan and the marketing plan. Faculty are taking their proper role as leaders in the College, rather than as production line workers. And administrators are enjoying increased cooperation, a reduction in unproductive hassles, and a far more productive College.

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, which oversees assessment processes in Virginia institutions, is a little uneasy with us. In a sense, we are the wild card in their deck. We are obviously working diligently, although not necessarily in quite the way that the Council had in mind. We continue to reassure the Council, urging their staff to trust us. So far, they seem to.

Prospects

Conflict is on the horizon. Some of the conflict will be between education and training. Some will be conflict secondary to competition for limited resources. Some will be between program faculty and the Curriculum Committee, as they try to sort out what the data really mean. But these conflicts are not only inevitable; they are healthy signs of a College in the process of change.

The assessment process is starting to tell us how well we are doing, and not all the news is good. We expect that the assessment process will give us guidance on how we can improve. Peers elected by the faculty to the Curriculum Committee will be making specific recommendations to the Dean regarding resource allocation, based on the outcomes assessment reports. Thus, faculty members are beginning to see that resource distribution is related to program quality and needs. And, through use of the assessment reports in our marketing process, the general public will be more aware of what Blue Ridge can do.

The approach we've taken does not mesh well with the traditional role of the institutional researcher. That's not a major problem for us, as in our administrative structure, institutional research is only an add-on function of the Director of Student Services [and Institutional Research]. Frankly, a full-time researcher would not be able to justify his existence at Blue Ridge. On the other hand, we now have more than thirty part-time researchers with a vested interest in doing their research effectively, if not always with the traditional polish and trimmings. In a sense, we are midway between the standard model of institutional research and Pat Cross's idea of classroom level research. Our research is decentralized to the curriculum level.

But institutional research is not the only decentralized administrative function at BRCC. The designing and writing of a wide variety of plans by faculty is now well accepted. We expect to develop peer evaluation of and between faculty and administrators. Is this a radical approach? We think of faculty control of governance as a return to a venerable tradition.

In the history of higher education, administration developed as an appendage of faculty, to perform those onerous tasks which faculty no longer wished to perform. Beginning historically as one or more functionaries, administration has become the camel that took over the tent. Student educational outcomes assessment has provided the opportunity to move most of the camel back into the desert, clearly leaving faculty in a more appropriate and influential position. Interestingly, the SACS Criteria suggests a system similar to what we have developed. For example:

III. "The quality of education provided by member institutions is the primary consideration in the decision to confirm or reaffirm

accreditation."

3.1: "The institution must define its expected educational results and describe how the achievement of these results will be ascertained. Although no specific format for this planning and evaluation process is prescribed, an effective process should include:

"1. broad-based involvement of faculty and administration."

4.4.6: "The primary responsibility for the improvement of the educational program resides with the faculty."

Even at Blue Ridge, administrators retain formal control of personnel changes and budgeting. However, those decisions must now be made in the context of data, and the faculty [in its research role] is the source of most of the data. Budget and personnel decisions by administrators can no longer be made on whim or administrative judgment alone. Not only will those decisions inevitably be reviewed by faculty, they will be previewed by faculty. In other ways, too, the helm has been passed to faculty. For example, as a result of Faculty Senate action, faculty will be designing and implementing an honors program. We revised the grievance system [our revision was also adopted nearly word for word -- even including a few weaknesses in grammar -- by the entire Virginia Community College System]. Our Faculty Senate rejected a student advising system proposed by administrators, and will implement its own advising system next spring, with administrative support. Our faculty have developed a leadership role, and the entire College has benefitted.

If we had it to do over again, we'd know more before we got started, but the assessment model we have used would be essentially the same one we would choose again. It has its limitations, however. It may not generalize well to other colleges. It does not provide uniform data which would allow comparisons between programs and colleges. It is decidedly low-tech and home-brewed. It depends on the cooperation of a President who is not afraid to delegate both responsibility and authority to faculty. But it does the job, raises a minimum of hell among faculty, demands little in the way of added resources, and reasserts faculty control over curriculum. It also promises significant faculty influence in the general governance of the College. It's an exciting time to be at BRCC. That suits us fine.

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